



93: Girls' Night In by cali-chan

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Summary: "You know you guys give everyone around you unrealistic expectations of what a relationship should be, right?" A girls' night in means no boys allowed, but Max is a good friend and is willing to allow an exception or two. PG-13, Fluff/friendship, post-S2, Mike/Eleven.

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"You know you guys give everyone around you unrealistic expectations of what a relationship should be, right?" A girls' night in means no boys allowed, but Max is a good friend and is willing to allow an exception or two.

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Max had to admit, albeit somewhat reluctantly, that having someone brush and style her hair actually felt pretty nice.

She had faint memories of her mother doing this for her when she was little, and of course she *had* helped Max get ready for dances and other school events that required a little bit more effort (but not *too* much), but in general Max wasn't one to care all that much about her appearance on the daily. And when it came to her hair, other than keeping it clean and out of her face whenever possible, she didn't care much about how it looked.

Because of her more tomboyish nature, she'd never really been into the more "girly" activities that generally took place during sleepovers. Not that she'd ever had that many girlfriends back in California; even back then, she'd always felt more comfortable around boys, partly because she'd always felt closer to her father than her mother, but also because they just shared more of her interests, like skating or sports.

Now she was friends with El, though, and she'd come to appreciate having a friend who was a girl more than she ever thought she would. Sometimes you just needed to get away from all that testosterone, right? Besides, as much as she loved the boys, they could be such massive dweebs; she and El were too cool for them, and sometimes they needed the reminder.

She spent the night often at the Hoppers', especially now that it was

summer, and had come to love these sleepovers with her friend. (She'd come to learn that Hopper himself was pretty cool, too, for a grown-up.) The fact that it got her out of her own house was a bonus. She had a sneaky suspicion that's why El invited her over so often, and why Hopper was so welcoming with her in a way he never really was with the boys, though neither of them had ever mentioned it. She was thankful nonetheless.

And on top of that, El was just very hard to say no to. Max had only learned secondhand what her childhood had been like, and even then only superficially, but it didn't take a genius to see that El had been very isolated growing up. Now that she was finally free from the lab, even after almost a year of being "out in the world," she still looked at everything around her in abject wonder, like the smallest and simplest things were magic. She was a bit like a puppy that way, so earnest in her enthusiasm that it was impossible to refuse her anything.

That's why Max found herself sitting on El's bed in her pajamas on this particular Friday night, her friend slowly but steadfastly trying to weave Max's hair into a French braid. El wanted to learn how to braid her own hair, but Max's was longer and more manageable than her own curls, so she was serving as a "practice dummy" until El became proficient enough to try and do her own hair.

The feeling was nice, though. Comforting, somehow. There was no accidental hair-pulling, no tightness. El was handling every strand of hair so carefully and delicately that it was almost putting Max to sleep. "You almost done?" she asked, suppressing a yawn.

"Stay still," her friend muttered behind her. She was focusing so hard on the braiding that Max could *hear* it in her voice. "If you keep moving, it will come out lopsee—lops—"

"Lopsided," Max supplied helpfully. Despite having finished freshman year with decent grades, El still had trouble with vocabulary every once in a while, and her friends were always glad to help. "But have you ever thought that making it lopsided might make it look cooler?" she suggested, just to be contrary. She did that sometimes when she was bored. It livened up the conversation.

El paused in her movements, and even though Max's back was to her, she could almost *see* the little frown in El's face, the one she always got when someone used an idiom she didn't know and she was trying to figure it out. After a moment, however, she continued braiding. "I'm almost done," she declared, implying that she wasn't about to start over from the top just on Max's whim.

"Well, *finally*!" Max exclaimed. "Can I see?"

"One second." She heard a shuffle as Eleven tied the end of the braid with an elastic band. "Don't move, I want to find a ribbon." The bed shifted as she got up and ran to her desk to search for a colorful piece of fabric to decorate the braid with.

Max groaned. "No! No ribbons. You'll make me look like a milkmaid." She got up off the bed with a huff, moving to stand in front of El's mirror and turning her head as far as it would comfortably go to try and see what the finished braid looked like.

"What's a milkmaid?" El asked, still searching through her desk drawers despite Max's complaint.

"Something I don't want to look like," Max retorted dryly. Obviously she couldn't manage to see the back of her head, but what little she could see out of the corner of her eye looked fine, as did the tail of the braid, which she pulled forward to lay over one shoulder.

"Did I do it right?" El asked as she finally gave up on the ribbon and came to stand behind Max.

"Yeah, it looks good," Max said, running her hand carefully over the braid; since she couldn't see it, at least she could feel if there was anything coming undone. "And it actually feels like it'll stay in place. Actually," she paused as she lowered her hands to her hips and stared at her full-body reflection in the mirror, "I look *hot*. I should let you braid my hair more often!" she told El over her shoulder with a chuckle.

El grinned at her, ecstatic. "We can do the lop-sided braid next time!" she suggested excitedly, high-fiving Max back when she raised her hand.

Max was just about to ask her if she wanted to see a movie when they heard a knock, and they both turned to the door to see Hopper leaning against the doorframe. He was wearing a non-flannel button up and slacks, and it was super weird to Max to see him dressed so fancy. Sure, she knew he had a date, but it was still a little surreal to see him in something other than his uniform— or the jeans and flannels he preferred when he had a day off.

El smiled brightly at him. "I braided Max's hair all by myself!" she quipped, pointing at Max's brand-spanking new hairdo like it was the greatest feat of all time.

"Nice," Hopper replied with a smile of his own, without even sparing a glance at Max's hair. The braid could've been all askew or falling apart, and Hopper would still have expressed pride in El. He was a good dad. "I'm almost on my way out," he said, rolling up the sleeves of his shirt, which Max thought made him look a bit more like his regular self, so she approved. "You girls going to be okay here on your own? Got enough snacks and everything?"

Both girls nodded, Max moving away from the mirror to sit on El's bed again. They'd already had pizza earlier and were fully intending on sugar-bombing their way through the evening once Hopper left. "So what's the plan for tonight? Watching movies and talking about boys?" he asked with a teasing smirk.

Max rolled her eyes. Movies, sure. As for the second part of that sentence... "If you know your daughter," she started in a cheeky tone, "then you know she only talks about *one* boy. Like, *all* the time."

They both turned to look at Eleven in unison, just in time to catch a flush starting to bloom on her cheeks. "Oh, believe me, I know," Hopper stated in an amused drawl, crossing his arms in a resigned fashion.

"Over and over and over again," Max added, because she couldn't help herself— the emphasis was worth it given how red her friend was turning.

"You don't have to tell *me*," Hopper picked up on the thread she had dropped just as eagerly.

"Ad. Nauseam." She made sure to emphasize each word, holding back a laugh as El covered her now-burning face with her hands.

"Been there, done that," Hopper commented with a shake of his head.

That was about the point El hit her limit. She pulled her hands away from her face with a huff. "Okay, that's enough!" she declared sharply, but it only made them break into snickers. She stomped back to her bed and sat near the headboard, crossing her legs almost aggressively as she plopped down by her pillows.

"You're going to be late," she reminded her father with a glare, but Max knew it was half-hearted; she wasn't really mad, just embarrassed. The fact that her face was still as red as a tomato only reinforced that idea.

"All right, all right, I'm going," Hopper conceded. (*Are people supposed to be this reluctant to go on a date?* Max wondered.) Contrary to his words, though, he walked further into the room so he could drop a kiss on the crown of El's head. And just like that, whatever indignation El held over being teased just kind of melted out of her. Max's heart felt a little heavy, because seeing them interact like this made her miss her own father.

"Have fun!" El called out to him sweetly as he made his way to the door.

"But not *too* much fun," Max muttered under her breath, because she was going to have to see him the next morning, and there was nothing more awkward than talking to an adult when you knew they'd probably been getting frisky not too long ago. *Shudder.*

Clearly her voice hadn't been quiet enough, because Eleven giggled behind her and Hopper stopped at the doorway, turning to look at them. "*You're* not my kid, so you don't get a say," he quipped, pointing at her with his index finger before turning toward the door again. Max laughed. "Don't wait up!"

As soon as the door closed behind him, Max let herself fall back on the bed so that she was lying right beside El. "You wanna watch a movie? I brought *Gremlins*," she suggested with something of a shrug.

El grimaced. "Isn't that a scary one?" she said, and it gave Max pause for a moment. If anyone in the world had any right to be doubtful of monster movies, it was Eleven. Maybe she should've thought better about her choice of movie.

Still, the Gremlins were hardly demodogs. "Nah," she replied with a dismissive wave of her hand. "It's more funny than scary, really. And, hey, you love Phoebe Cates, right?" She poked her friend lightly in the arm and El tried to squirm away. Max could already see that she was starting to break through her reluctance. "Besides, some of the little monsters are actually pretty cute. You'll like it, I'm telling you."

El took a few seconds to think about it before giving in with a sigh. "Okay," she mumbled, like she was still not entirely sure, but was willing to go with it for now.

Max was about to cheer loudly when a tinny, scratchy voice called out Eleven's name from somewhere in the room. Max opened her mouth to ask what that was, when El almost literally *flew* off the bed and rushed to make a dive for her desk, opening up a drawer and pulling out a walkie-talkie. Max fought the urge to roll her eyes. She loved her friends, nerds though they might be, but if there was one thing about them she would never understand, it was their obsession with talking via radio, rather than using the phone. Y'know, like normal people did.

El lifted the walkie up to her mouth and pressed the button. "Mike?" she asked carefully. "I'm here." Of *course* it had to be Wheeler calling, Max thought, because apparently those two could not spend one day without talking to each other, otherwise the world would implode. Or something.

"El?" came Mike's voice again. He sounded more staticky than she was used to hearing from the boys' walkies, which she initially thought was odd, but then she remembered that the Hoppers' cabin was in the middle of the forest. El had mentioned that Mike was spending the night at Will's— something about coming up with a joint present for their siblings, who were moving out for college in just a few weeks— and that was probably the only reason why he was within range without the aid of El's powers. Will's house was the closest, though it was still far enough that the signal was sketchy. "Hi.

Are you busy?"

El turned hopeful eyes on her and once again Max was reminded of a puppy. Before saying yes, however, Max *did* roll her eyes, because this was supposed to be a girls' night in and that meant *no boys allowed*.

But being the good friend that she was, she did eventually wave at Eleven to go on, which she did excitedly. Max, meanwhile, went outside to wheel the TV into El's room, so they could start the movie as soon as El's conversation with Mike was over. She hoped it wouldn't take too long, but at the same time she knew that was probably just wishful thinking.

When she went back into the room, carefully pushing the TV in, making sure she didn't accidentally slam it against the doorframe, she noticed that El had moved back to her bed, sitting there with the walkie in one hand and a stuffed toy in the other, like the teddy bear was somehow a replacement for her boyfriend who was currently too far away for her to hug.

Mike's voice was still coming in through the radio, though it was clearer now, and Max figured El was using her powers to enhance the signal somehow. "...not something most people our age usually like," Mike was saying as Max pushed the TV against the wall directly in front of the bed, "but I figured since you've never been, I dunno, maybe you'd want to go."

El's head cocked slightly to the side as it often did when she was curious or confused about something. "But what *is* it?" she asked, just as Max pulled the desk chair toward her and sat on it, stretching her legs out on the bed. "What will we see there?"

"Oh, well, there's animals doing tricks," Mike explained. "There's also people doing cool stuff, like juggling, jumping through hoops on fire, there's clowns, and even flying trapeze artists; those were my favorites when I was a kid..." It finally clicked in Max's mind that he was talking about the circus. She'd seen flyers around town that one had set up shop a couple of towns over, but she hadn't paid much attention to them.

"Flying?" El asked, and Max had to chuckle at the awed and slightly scandalized expression on her face.

"No, no, they don't *actually* fly," Mike clarified right away. "A trapeze is... kind of like a swing, but it hangs from the ceiling of the circus tent, and the trapeze artists swing on them and do acrobatics, like hanging off the trapeze with just one hand, or with their feet, or something." El's eyes narrowed as she tried to picture the scene. "Sometimes they leap from one trapeze to the other, and that's why people say they're 'flying,'" he finished quickly.

El nodded, even though Mike couldn't see it, and it made Max snort. "Sounds fun," El said, ignoring the amused sound.

"Yeah, it is," he agreed enthusiastically. "So, um, do you think you want to come with, then?"

"Yes!" El replied straight away, but then she paused, seemingly remembering something. "I have to ask Dad, though. He already left, and he said not to wait for him, so it won't be until tomorrow."

"That's fine," Mike assured her, probably just happy that she *wanted* to go at all. Max scoffed at how dumb that was. As if El would ever say no! "Just let me know so we can pick you up, all right?" He was silent for a second on the other end of the line. "Gives me another excuse to talk to you, I guess," he admitted in a soft tone. "I missed you today."

Max swore she literally saw Eleven *melt*. Like, full-on soft-serve-ice-cream, gooey-chocolate-cookie *melt* right there on her bed. "I missed you, too," she returned the sentiment with a tiny smile, and *God*, even when they were in completely separate locations they still managed to be completely nauseating.

She pretended to gag, and El laughed with a shake of her head. "Did you figure out your present?" El asked Mike, blessedly shifting the conversation back to less mushy territory. Max could only take so much of that.

Mike sighed via the walkie. "Not really," he mumbled, and if Eleven hadn't been enhancing the signal, Max was sure they wouldn't have

been able to hear him say that. "Will wants to make them a mixtape, but I dunno... isn't that kind of a cheap present?"

"Not if it's good," was El's straightforward answer, again accompanied by a gesture Mike couldn't see— this time a shrug.

"Yeah, I guess," Mike agreed reluctantly. "Or maybe we'll just keep trying until we come up with something better. Well, maybe not; we're kind of running out of time, too." He thought about it for a moment. "Eh, maybe we'll just mail them a present when they're already in New York."

"Mike," El chastised him in a tone that had Max imagining *him* as a puppy. "That's not nice. Your sister deserves better." Max shook her head; they were such an old married couple already.

"Fine, fine," Mike laughed. "We'll come up with something, I promise." There was a shuffling sound, like Mike was shifting his position. "Sorry, my leg was falling asleep," he explained. "So, what are you guys doing? Watching movies?"

Not yet, Max mouthed with an annoyed gesture, which made Eleven laugh again. "We're about to watch *Gremlins*," El then spoke into the walkie-talkie, in response to Mike's question.

"Aw, man, that's a good one!" Mike lamented through the radio. "Now I wish I was there so I could watch it with you guys."

"No boys allowed!" Max exclaimed haughtily as she swung her legs from the bed to hang over the armrest of the chair she was sitting in. They all knew very well that *Gremlins* wasn't the real reason why Mike wanted to be there with them, anyway.

El hadn't been pressing the button on the walkie, so Max's words never made it through, but after laughing some more, El relayed the message. "Max says 'no boys allowed,'" she passed on the words with a giggle.

Mike scoffed. "Tell Maxine I'll remember that the next time she needs help with algebra," he declared, though of course El didn't need to tell Max that because she heard it clearly with her own ears.

In response, Max flipped him the bird, which El, still giggling, promptly relayed as, "She says she very much appreciates your help and patience." Max stuck her tongue out at her, and El did the same right back.

"Yeah, right." Obviously Mike wasn't buying Eleven's "translation," but he let it slide nonetheless. "All right, I'll let you guys get back to your movie, then. Let me know if you like it!" he requested excitedly.

"I will," El replied. "Should I call you in the morning about tomorrow?" Mike confirmed that he would be at Will's until around noon, so just to call him on the Supercomm, as he should be within range. "Say hi to Will for us," she added.

"Oh, yeah, of course," he agreed. "He's around, he just— he went back to his house to say goodbye to his mom, though that was a while ago... maybe he just had to go to the bathroom or something, who knows." As if realizing what he just said, he hurried to add, "Okay, um, I'll talk to you tomorrow, then?"

"Uh-huh. I'm sure Dad will say yes," she assured him, and Max had to agree— Hopper liked to grumble about Mike and Eleven's relationship with him, but in the end El had him wrapped around her little finger, so he would do anything as long as it made her happy. That's what fathers were supposed to do. "I can't wait," she added with a smile.

"Me too," Mike replied in a similar soft tone. "I know you're gonna love it. So, uh, I'll wait for your call tomorrow," he added, and Max had to repress a groan because *he'd already said that* and was this conversation ever going to end? They had a monster movie to get to!

"Yes," Eleven said. "Have a good night," she added lovingly.

"You too. Sweet dreams," he said, and then after a second of silence, "And, oh! Don't worry about the creatures in *Gremlins*, they're really not—"

That was about the time Max decided she'd had enough of this lovefest for one night, so without bothering to hear what the last half of that sentence was, she stood up, grabbed the walkie-talkie from

El's hands, and brought it up to her mouth. "*Over and out*, Wheeler!" she barked through the line.

It took a second for Mike to realize it wasn't El's voice coming through the device anymore, but then he cackled. "Hah! Wait until I tell Dustin I got you to say 'over and out,'" he said with a snort. Then there was a pause. "Um, over and out."

Max rolled her eyes and lowered the antenna on the radio, throwing it back to El, who caught it with her mind. "God, I thought he would never shut up!" Max groaned as she pushed the chair back to El's desk and came back to sit on the bed.

El had plucked the walkie from the air and was looking down at it longingly. Max sighed, knowing the *mood* still lingered. "So, you guys are going to the circus?" she asked as she let herself fall back to lay on the bed like she had earlier, figuring the quicker she got the mushiness out of her system, the quicker they could get to the movie.

"Yes," El responded, shifting her gaze from the walkie to Max. Then she blinked, almost like she'd just realized something. "I'm sorry— do you want to come with us?" she offered politely.

Max grimaced. "No, thanks. The circus stopped being entertaining to me when I hit double digits." She shook her head. "Besides, you shouldn't go around inviting other people. I'm pretty sure lover boy intends this to be a date."

El frowned, once again confused. "But his mom and Holly are coming with us," she countered carefully, not seeming to understand how those two things could be true at the same time.

"Yeah, but that's only because someone needs to drive you there, and Mrs. Wheeler is taking Holly anyway," Max explained. El had spent an entire school year in Hawkins High, and she mostly understood the broad strokes of society now, but sometimes the more subtle aspects of teenage interaction still eluded her. "I would bet my skateboard that when you actually get there, you'll just go off on your own, and it'll be like any other date."

El still seemed to be ruminating on something. "How do you know?"

she asked eventually. "How do you know when it's a date?"

Now Max frowned. "Well, for you two it's kind of *always* a date," she explained, but then she figured she should be more specific. "I mean, you guys are dating. That basically means every time you do something together on your own, it counts as a date."

"Okay..." El said, but she still sounded unsure. "So... we don't have to say it's a date? When he asks me, or when I ask him?"

Max sat up again, knowing that she was going to have to put more effort into her explanation; TV stereotypes probably had not done El any favors in this area. "Not really," she started. "Here's the thing: you two like each other, right? Like boyfriend and girlfriend?" El nodded. "And you don't like anyone else the same way you like Mike." El shook her head emphatically. "And we *know* he's all about you, so it's a given that he doesn't want to date anyone else." El blushed.

"And you make out all the time, right?" she continued before pausing. "What am I saying— of *course* you do; we've all had to witness that, unfortunately," she added with a disgruntled shake of her head.

"You have *not*!" El retorted, her cheeks redder than Max's hair. And okay, maybe they hadn't exactly caught them *in flagrante* or anything, but everybody knew those two made out any chance they got. It's not like it was some terrible, sordid secret or anything.

"My point is," she elaborated further, "that you two are very obviously *more than friends*. So that means whenever you do stuff together by yourselves, it's not a friendly thing. It's a couple thing. So it's a date."

El remained pensive for a moment, but then a smile grew on her lips. "I'm going on a date tomorrow," she said gleefully, hugging her stuffed bear.

Max shook her head in disbelief, but she was smiling at the same time. "Yes, and you've been on dates before, too." El said nothing, just hugged her teddy bear tighter. Max chuckled. "You know you guys give everyone around you unrealistic expectations of what a relationship should be, right?"

"Unrealistic?" El wondered.

"Yeah." Max rearranged her position so she could sit with her back against the headboard, much like El, but with her legs stretched out. "We're not even proper sophomores yet, and you two are, like, totally in love already." She didn't know if the L-word had come up between the two of them yet, but if it had, Eleven didn't say anything. And perhaps that was for the better. "That kinda shit doesn't... happen," she added in a flabbergasted tone.

El frowned, almost affronted. "But there are other couples in our school," she offered as a counterpoint.

"Yeah, and they'll all break up before the semester is over," Max mumbled, waving the argument off. "Dating is cool— making out is fun, and it's nice to have someone to talk to, someone you can go places with and stuff. But it's not always some epic romance, you know? Especially not at our age."

She shrugged. "I mean, Lucas is great and all, but it's not like I'm looking for some grand love story. You know what my family's like, right? In my experience, relationships kind of suck." She pulled a pillow from under her and laid it on her thighs. "I'd kind of figured if I ever get a boyfriend that is somewhat decent, even if it's just for a short time, then that's basically a win, I guess. Boys are all afraid of commitment, anyway."

She looked down and started playing with a loose thread on the hem of her tank top. "But then I see you two making goo-goo eyes at each other all the time, and, like... risking your lives to protect each other, and it's just..." She sighed, her shoulders drooping. "I'll never have something like *that*, you know?" She looked up to meet El's gaze. "Kinda stings a little," she admitted.

El was looking at her sadly and, damn, that wasn't what Max intended with any of this. "I'm sorry..." she said quietly.

Max shook her head and proceeded to hit her with the pillow. El yelped. "No, you doofus. I mean that in a good way!" Max said, dismissing any kind of pity as vigorously as she could. El looked at her like she couldn't understand how one could say such a thing 'in a

good way.' "It shows me that maybe it's not a bad thing to want that. To want a relationship like that."

She hugged the pillow to herself, much like El had with her stuffed bear. "If I can have something even a fraction as deep as what you two have, that's a hundred times better than just... avoiding making my parents' mistakes. It makes me strangely hopeful." She smiled at her friend and nudged her with her shoulder. "Besides, Wheeler is a *lot* less of a jerk when you're around, so that's a bonus."

El laughed, and her mirth was contagious, so Max found herself joining in. "Anyway!" she said, trying to regain her breath. "That's enough about boys. This is supposed to be a girls' night in! We don't need boys— they're all stinky and gross, anyway."

Eleven looked like she was about to say something, and Max narrowed her eyes at her. "If you open your mouth to say that Mike isn't stinky or gross, I will hit you with the pillow again," she warned.

"I was *going* to say," El started teasingly, "that you'll find a Mike of your own someday." She smiled at Max. "And even if you don't, you're still the coolest."

"Hell yeah, I am!" Max exclaimed, slapping her hand down on the bedspread enthusiastically. She hurried to stand up. "Come on, let's get something to eat. You're not getting out of watching *Gremlins*, but I'm feeling like hot cocoa."

El grimaced, clearly not totally on board with that idea, but stood up as well. "It's too hot for hot cocoa," she complained, and honestly, she did have a point.

"Fine," Max conceded. "Just regular chocolate milk, then," she countered.

That gave Eleven pause. "...With Eggos?" she suggested tentatively.

"Yes," Max agreed wholeheartedly. She wasn't as obsessed with frozen waffles as El was, but she did like them, and tonight she was feeling like the more sweets they had, the better. Hence her follow-up suggestion: "And whipped cream!"

"Yes!" El agreed with a big grin, eyes wide and bright like she'd been given an unexpected present. Max laughed and threw an arm around her shoulders, guiding her friend out of the room and toward the kitchen. Dessert was always the cherry on top of a fun sleepover with her best girlfriend, pun absolutely intended.

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Notes: Max invented the Katniss braid before Katniss was even a spark in Suzanne Collins' mind, pun intended. ;D One day I will write a story about these two kickass girls that actually passes the Bechdel Test. It will have to be outside the "Moments" series, for obvious reasons, but as soon as season 3 gives me more interaction between Max and El (hint hint, Duffer brothers), I am *so* on it.

Gremlins is a 1984 movie executive produced by Steven Spielberg, starring Zach Galligan and Phoebe Cates, aka that girl from *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* that all hot-blooded straight boys were in love with in the 80s. *Gremlins* was indeed considered horror/comedy, and some of the critters in it, Gizmo in particular, were actually really cute, inspiring several cuddly toy lines. I have to admit, however, that I'm more on El's side of the argument here, as the transformed gremlins used to scare the living daylights out of me when I was a kid. Fun fact: *Gremlins* was actually one of two movies (the other one was *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*) that pushed the MPAA to create the PG-13 rating in 1984.

Circuses featuring exotic animal acts were a lot less controversial in the 80s than they are these days; it's a good thing our views as a society have evolved since then, in my opinion, though I wanted to include one here because it was such a staple of that time period.